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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to determine the essential qualities of proper nouns and to determine the differences between proper and common nouns by reviewing research and writings on the subject. Both proper and common nouns are found to connote the attributes of objects as their content. Common nouns, however, are those that identify a certain substance on the common side with the same kind of reference, while proper nouns are those that show a certain substance on the peculiar side. The differences between plural and singular nouns are also discussed. Contains four references. (MDM)

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Mitsuharu Mizuno

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AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL STUDY ON PROPER NOUNS*

Mitsuharu Mizuno

1. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times two much disputed questions in grammar and logic are:

(1) What is the essential quality of proper nouns?

(2) What is the difference between proper nouns and common nouns?

Among philosophers in general since Plato, it may have been said that proper nouns have not any meaning more than that they indicate objects. John Stuart Mill gave the well known interpretation that proper names are not connotative but they denote.

2. THE ESSENCE OF PROPER NOUNS

Investigating the 'real meaning' of proper nouns, Jespersen (1924: 65-66) points out that proper nouns connote certain attributes as well as common nouns. Then, what is the difference between proper nouns and common nouns. He had to look for the difference somewhere else because both of them connote. He found the solution in the quantity of attributes that they connote, and claimed that proper nouns are what connote the fewest. However, if we examine the real meaning of words, there can be no difference when the same objects are put into words by means of proper nouns and common nouns.

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Thus, we are not able to separate proper nouns and common nouns with this standard. For instance, Jespersen's figure kept on changing from the cradle to the grave. If we compare one as a baby with one as a university professor, we may be unable to see them as the same person, but they are the same and consistent as an identical life. This oneness, namely the peculiarity of Jespersen is the common side of him who goes on changing through his life. On the other hand, the common noun 'a university professor' is the word which identified his job, or 'a Dane' his nationality.

Words are the expression of ideas. The idea of object is put out through the linguistic norm (viz. vocabulary, syntax) to become sorts of voices or letters. As a result, they pass through a linguistic process: [object → cognition → expression] (See Tokieda: 1950; Miura: 1977). If we examine the real meaning of words, both proper nouns and common nouns connote the attributes of objects as their content. But the difference between proper nouns and common nouns are the side on which we grasp objects. That is to say, common nouns are those which identify a certain substance on the common side with the same kind of reference. For example, the common noun 'man' is the expression which got Peter, James, John, and other innumerable individuals on the common side. On the other hand, proper nouns are those which show a certain substance on the peculiar side. Thus, putting "him" into a word on this peculiar side, we get the proper noun, Otto Jespersen.

3. PROPER NOUNS BECOMING COMMON NOUNS

Jespersen (1924: 66-67) also presents some examples of the everyday phenomenon of a proper noun becoming a common noun as follows:

"Walter Pater says that France was about to become an Italy more Italian than Italy itself (Renaissance, 133). In this way Caesar become the general name for Roman emperors, German

Kaisers and Russian tsars (in Shakespeare's tragedy III. 2. 55, the rabble shouts: "Liue Brutus, liue, liue ··· Let him be Caesar") —— to mention only a few examples."

In these expressions, the writer first recognizes an object, and then recollects the most typical features of the object. In addition, he got the object on both the common and peculiar sides to diverge from the word as a proper noun. This step of diversion is a transitional one that is true of a common noun as of a proper noun. This case may be best seen in the use of proper nouns in the plural as referred to later. As the result of a higher development of the diversion it transforms a common noun. As an example, 'Caesar' standing for Roman Emperors is a case of common nouns. Here, it is not merely, that a word which is a proper noun 'Caesar' was diverted into a common noun, but also that a single word of a common noun was transformed from the word of the proper noun 'Caesar' through the recognition of a particular Roman Emperor itself. Therefore, in the case of proper nouns becoming common nouns, we should distinguish the step of 'diversion' where there are dual recognitions, from the step of 'transformation' where there is a single recognition. The former is a transitional stage where it is a common noun as well as a proper noun. The latter is a stage where it has the same form as the proper noun while the content is that of a genuine common noun. Although the phenomenon of a proper noun becoming a common noun eminently deserves discussion, it is not true that the difference between them is just the difference in degree as Jespersen said. (Miyashita 1982 : 59)

Moreover, Jespersen (1924 : 67–68) points out that it is difficult to distinguish the first and last names from common nouns as follows:

"With our modern European system of composite personal names we have a transference of names of a somewhat different kind, when a child through the mere fact of his birth acquires his father's family name. Here it would be rash to assert that Tymperleys, for instance, of the same family have nothing in common but

their name; they may sometimes be recognized by their nose or by their gait, but their common inheritance, physical and psychical, may be much more extensive, and so the name Tymperley may get a sense not essentially different from that of such "common names" as Yorkshireman, or Frenchman, or negro, or dog. In some of the latter cases it is difficult to define exactly what the name "connotes" or by what characteristics we are able to tell that a person belongs to this or the other class, yet logicians agree that all these names are connotative. Then why not Tymperley"?

Although family names are called proper nouns, in fact it is a common noun because it is not gotten from the peculiar side of an individual, but on the side of his legal relation common among family members. On the other hand, the first name is a proper noun because it refers to the peculiar side of an individual. For instance, Jespersen is a common noun which identifies him on the side of family relation, Otto is a proper noun here which identifies him on the side of peculiarity though it is also identified as a group of names considered Germanic. Furthermore Otto Jespersen is a compound proper noun which identifies him on both sides, family relation and his peculiarity.

4. THE PLURAL EXPRESSION OF PROPER NOUNS

Furthermore, Jespersen (1924: 69) looks into the plural expression of proper nouns as follows:

"The use of proper names in the plural (cf. MEG II, 4. 4) is made intelligible by the theory we have here defended. In the strict sense no proper name can have a plural, it is just as unthinkable as a plural of the pronoun "I": there is only one "I" in existence, and there is only one "John" and one "Rome," if by these names we understand the individual person or city that we are speaking of at the moment. But in the above-mentioned modified senses it is possible for proper names to form a plural in the usual way. Take the following classes: (1) individuals which have more or less

arbitrarily been designated by the same name : in the party there were three Johns and four Marys / I have not visited any of Romes in America ; (2) members of the same family : all the Tymperleys have long noses / in the days of the Stuarts / the Henry Spinkers (cf. CH. XIV, plural of approximation) ; (3) people or things like the individual denoted by the name : Edison and Marconis may thrill the world with astounding novelties / Judases / King-Henrys, Queen-Elizabeths go their way (Carlyle) / the Canadian Rockies are advertised as "fifty Switzerlands is one" ; (4) by metonymy, a proper name may stand for a work of the individual denoted by the name : there are two Rembrandts in this gallery.

The object of the plural expression is the same sort of substance. Though three Johns have common features such as 'male' and 'human being', here they are not identified on this side. The names of those three are independent of one another, each of the content has different object of an individual. But those forms are common. That is to say, the words of those proper nouns are attributes belonging to the individuals which are used by them. Therefore, though the form of words are the same, they are not gotten on the peculiar side of the objects but on the formal side of words common to one another. The cases 'Marys' and 'Romes' are also examples of this. They are the cases which the words of proper nouns were converted into those of common nouns. Consequently, the difference between proper nouns and common nouns is on the side of the objects they refer to. Namely, even if the form of two words is the same, they are proper nouns when they are seen on the peculiar side of the objects. Vice versa, they are common nouns when they identify the common side of the objects.

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